

Assignment: flash portraits

Thanks to our constant exposure to sophisticated lighting in fashion, advertising, and editorial portraiture—some of which may have taken an entire day to set up, with an army of assistants to shift the equipment around—our expectations of lighting are now higher than ever. Nevertheless, you don't need elaborate lighting and professional equipment in order to achieve satisfying results. The essential thing to remember is that when you use a flash with your camera in ambient light, you have two light sources at your disposal.

thebrief

Using on- or off-camera or studio flash, create a portrait that benefits from flash lighting—for example, a shot that is strongly backlit, or one in a dark or dimly lit location. Consider the whole composition, making use of the background and ambient light if this is appropriate, and ensure that the quality of light on the face of your subject suits both the style of the portrait you wish to create and the setting.

Points to remember

- you can make use of any available surface to bounce or diffuse the light
- a warm-up filter over the flash or lens will reduce the blue color of flash
- set manual exposure control so that you can vary the balance of the flash with ambient light
- using an off-camera flash, linked by cable or by slave-release, gives you the chance to light the model from different directions

must-see masters

Diane Arbus (1923–1971)

Author of a uniquely moving corpus of work, Arbus used unsentimental encounters and uncompromising lighting in order to create her often unsettling portraits.

Nobuyoshi Araki (1940–)

One of Japan's leading photographers, Araki has taken direct, almost exploitative portraits of Tokyo's "water margin"—its hidden nightlife—that have turned the flash-snap into high art.

Eva Mueller (1965–)

Modern, stylish and sometimes starkly lit, Mueller's work is a good example of modern editorial photography in which narrative and comment are combined with a dark and humorous twist.

Suki Dhanda (1969–)

A versatile editorial portraitist, Dhanda seems able to obtain telling portraits under any lighting conditions and yet make the result look candid, effortless, and natural.



ISO 100 Focal length 50mm 1/250 sec at f/1.8



ISO 100 Focal length 40mm 1/60 sec at f/2.8



ISO 100 Focal length 50mm 1/60 sec at f/2.8



ISO 160 Focal length 52mm 1/250 sec at f/14



ISO 100 Focal length 50mm 1/200 sec at f/2.8



ISO 100 Focal length 70mm 1/200 sec at f/2.8



ISO 100 Focal length 48mm 1/13 sec at f/2.8



ISO 100 Focal length 48mm 1/60 sec at f/2.8



ISO 160 Focal length 70mm 1/13 sec at f/4

1 2 3
4 5 6
7 8 9

lightbox

toptips

1 fill-in flash | and ambient light
A touch of fill-in flash can bring a pleasant light to the face. In this shot, the greenish color cast of the ambient light caused by the trees has not been entirely eliminated by the flash.

2 backlighting | flash strategy
With two stops extra power, flash can light a subject even when there is backlighting from the sun—but the effect can look unnatural if the face is too bright. Beware of shiny highlights on the skin, lips, and teeth.

3 modern concepts | strong flash
The blasted-out look has become fashionable as the visual vernacular of the web gains acceptance. The lively colors of the background and lack of shadow ensure this image works.

4 5 direct flash | positioning
Flash used from a position close to the lens leads to flat and usually unflattering lighting. By using off-camera flash you can achieve softer, more attractive modeling or dramatic effects with strong shadows.

6 balanced light | improvising
A balance of flash and strong available light is usually the easiest to improvise and opens up many more possibilities. The warm incandescent light in this shot has balanced the cold flash light.

7 8 shadows | good and bad
Your first instinct may be to avoid casting shadows with the flash, but they can be intentional and add to the mood, as in 7. In 8 they are accidental—stand your subject away from walls to avoid this kind of shadow.

9 local color | bounced flash
You can allow ambient light to dominate but use flash to pick up local color. Here flash was bounced off a red wall to give a strongly warm cast to the image.

▶ see results